Hurricane Ian Devastates Florida, Death Count Crosses 40

02/10/2022 21:23 by admin

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Aerial photos and video show breathtaking destruction

Florida: The death count from Hurricane Ian, one of the most powerful storms ever to hit the United States, soared above 40 Saturday, as President Joe Biden heads to Florida later in the week to survey the devastation.

Shocked Florida communities were only just beginning to face the full scale of the destruction, with rescuers still searching for survivors in submerged neighborhoods and along the state's southwest coast.

Homes, restaurants and businesses were ripped apart when Ian roared ashore as a powerful Category 4 hurricane on Wednesday.

The confirmed number of storm-related deaths rose to 44 statewide, the Florida Medical Examiners Commission said late Saturday, but reports of additional fatalities were still emerging county by county -- pointing to a far higher final toll.

Hard-hit Lee County alone recorded 35 deaths, according to its sheriff, while US media including NBC and CBS tallied more than 70 deaths either directly or indirectly related to the storm.

In the coastal state of North Carolina, the governor's office confirmed four deaths related to Ian there.

Biden and his wife, Jill, will visit Florida on Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre tweeted, but the couple will first head to Puerto Rico on Monday to survey the destruction from a different storm, Hurricane Fiona, which struck the US territory last month.

In Florida's Lee County on Saturday, rescuers and ordinary citizens in boats were still saving the last trapped inhabitants of the small island of Matlacha. Debris, abandoned vehicles and downed trees littered the pummeled hamlet's main street and surroundings that are dotted by colorful wooden houses with corrugated roofs.

The community, home to about 800 people, was cut off from the mainland following damage to two bridges, and those who fled early were only just beginning to return home to survey the destruction.

Sitting in the shadow of a deserted Matlacha house, Chip Farrar told AFP that "nobody's telling us what to do, nobody's telling us where to go."

"The evacuation orders came in very late," the 43-year-old said. "But most people that are still here wouldn't have left anyway. It's a very blue-collar place. And most people don't have anywhere to go, which is the biggest issue."

Sixteen migrants were missing from a boat that sank during the hurricane, according to the US Coast Guard. Two people were found dead and nine others rescued, including four Cubans who swam to shore in the Florida Keys.

More than 900,000 customers remained without power in Florida Saturday night, hampering efforts by those who evacuated to return to their homes to take stock of what they lost.

In Fort Myers Beach, a town on the Gulf of Mexico coast which took the brunt of the storm, Pete Belinda said his home was "just flipped upside down, soaking wet, full of mud."

Ian barreled over Florida and into the Atlantic Ocean before making US landfall again, this time on the South Carolina coast Friday as a Category 1 hurricane, with maximum sustained winds of 85 miles (140 kilometers) per hour.

It was later downgraded to a post-tropical cyclone, and it was dissipating over Virginia late Saturday.

More than 45,000 people remained without power across North Carolina and Virginia, tracking website poweroutage.us said Saturday.

CoreLogic, a firm that specializes in property analysis, said wind-related losses for residential and commercial properties in Florida could cost insurers up to $32 billion, while flooding losses could reach $15 billion.

"This is the costliest Florida storm since Hurricane Andrew made landfall in 1992," CoreLogic's Tom Larsen said.

- Rescues continue -

As of Saturday morning, Governor Ron DeSantis's office said more than 1,100 rescues had been made across Florida.

DeSantis reported that hundreds of rescue personnel were going door-to-door "up and down the coastline."

Many Floridians evacuated ahead of the storm, but thousands chose to shelter in place and ride it out.

Two hard-hit barrier islands near Fort Myers -- Pine Island and Sanibel Island -- were cut off after the storm damaged causeways to the mainland.

Aerial photos and video show breathtaking destruction in Sanibel and elsewhere.

A handful of restaurants and bars reopened in Fort Myers, giving an illusion of normalcy amid downed trees and shattered storefronts.

Before pummeling Florida, Ian plunged all of Cuba into darkness after downing the island's power network.

Electricity was gradually returning, mainly in Havana, but many homes remain without power.

A new storm in the Pacific, Hurricane Orlene, intensified to Category 2 strength off the Mexican coast, where it was forecast to make landfall in the coming days.

Human-induced climate change is resulting in more severe weather events across the globe, scientists say.

- AFP